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THE CASE OF THE SUPPOSITITIOUS PRINCE

by Mary Ann Connell

In 1687 a predominantly Protestant England was resigned to endure the reign of Roman Catholic James II. James had no male heir; consequently, his Protestant daughters, Mary and Anne, were destined to inherit his throne. Catholics were hated and feared by all Protestant classes with an unreasoning passion. Any report of Catholic ill-doing would be believed without question. A rumor in 1687 that James, then fifty-two and considered doddering for the time, was to become a father again sent a pall of fear over his anti-Catholic subjects and fostered a legend that today has never been entirely disproved—the legend of James Francis Edward, the supposititious prince.

James was considered by most of his Protestant subjects to be an offensive monarch; he, in turn, regarded them as heretics. His marriage to Mary of Modena, an Italian Catholic twenty-five years his junior, had been received with disgust and dismay.¹ During the first ten years of marriage Mary Beatrice had had two miscarriages and had given birth to four children, all of whom died before the age of five. By the time of James's accession to the throne in 1685, it seemed unlikely that Mary Beatrice would ever bear him a son. She had not been pregnant since 1682, and it was generally assumed that either she or James was sterile.² Thus, fears of a Catholic heir to James appeared to be groundless, and the future of England seemed secure for a Protestant succession.

Loyal Catholics openly called for a miracle. Mary Beatrice's Mother, the Duchess of Modena, visited the shrine of Our Lady of Loretto in July of 1687 with prayers and rich offerings to the Virgin that, by her intercession, Mary Beatrice might have a son. The Queen had been praying for the same blessing to her favorite saint, Francis

¹F. C. Turner, *James II* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1948), pp. 111-113.

²J. P. Kenyon, "The Birth of the Old Pretender," *History Today*, XIII (May 1963), 419.

Xavier. These prayers were joined by those of zealous Roman Catholics in other parts of the world and at every shrine in England.³

During late summer of 1687 James escorted the Queen to Bath and from there continued on through the west of England, visiting the larger towns in an effort to conciliate his subjects and gain their affection. While on this journey, James made a pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Winifred's Well in north Wales; there he prayed for a son and drank of the miracle-working waters. On the 6th of September he rejoined Mary Beatrice at Bath where they remained until September 13th. James then returned to Windsor and was met there by the Queen on October 6th.⁴

By the end of October rumors began to circulate that the Queen was pregnant. Mary Beatrice was so astounded over this good fortune that she waited until the end of her second month before she published the news. On December 23, 1687, the Queen's pregnancy was officially announced by royal proclamation. January 15th and 29th were appointed as days of public thanksgiving and prayer throughout the kingdom. A special form and order of worship was drawn up to be used at the Anglican services. The clergy obeyed, but few in the congregations made the proper responses or showed any signs of reverence or enthusiasm. In his *Diary*, Clarendon commented that most spent their time ridiculing the "Queen's Great Belly."⁵

The announcement of the Queen's pregnancy was received at first with incredulity. The medical history of Mary Beatrice, plus the wide-spread assumption that James was diseased, had led the English nation to entertain no fear of a Catholic heir in spite of the fact that the thirty year old Queen was only in the middle of her child-bearing years. Earlier rumors of the pregnancy had not been taken seriously, for, to the Protestants, there was the very realistic hope

³David Hume, *The History of England* (Philadelphia: Porter and Coates, 1776), V, 388.

⁴Agnes Strickland, ed., *Lives of the Queens of England* (Philadelphia: Blanchard and Lea, 1855), IX, 155.

⁵Lord Clarendon's *Diary*, as quoted in Sir John Dalrymple, *Memoirs of Great Britain and Ireland, from the Dissolution of the Last Parliament of Charles II Until the Sea-Battle of La Hogue* (2nd. ed.; London: W. Strahar and T. Cadell, 1771-1788), III, App. 1, 313-314. Hereafter cited as *Dalrymple's Memoirs*. See also, Thomas Babington Macaulay, *The History of England from the Accession of James II* (New York and Chicago: Belford, Clarke, and Co., 1887), II, 285.

that the Queen would miscarry as she had done twice before. As the pregnancy progressed, the joy of the Roman Catholics was boundless. They declared that the event was due to the direct intervention of the Diety and was a miracle given in answer to the prayers of the faithful. They likened the Queen to the Biblical Sarah and Hannah, who bore sons in their old age.⁶

There is no doubt that the behavior of James's zealous Jesuit followers was partly responsible for the disbelief with which the news of the pregnancy was received. They dwelt on the tales of the miracle-birth, prophesied with confidence that the baby would be a son, and offered to back their prediction by laying twenty guineas to one. "Heaven, they affirmed, would not have interfered, but for a great end."⁷ One devout Catholic predicted that the Queen would give birth to twins—one would be King of England and the other Pope. Mary delighted to hear this prophecy, and her ladies told her of it repeatedly.⁸ Though a son was eagerly anticipated and predicted, certain attempts were made by Roman priests to provide for the possibility of a daughter. They advanced the theory that the daughter of the King and Queen—namely, a princess born after James's accession to the throne—should succeed to the throne before his daughters born when he was only a duke.⁹

The Roman Catholics would have been much wiser had they borne their good fortune with moderation and treated the Queen's pregnancy as a natural event. The insolent attitude of the papists aroused widespread indignation, while their confident predictions of the birth of a son compelled many Protestants to suspect that they would use any means to implement these forecasts. Thus, most Protestants, both Whig and Tory, were convinced that the announced pregnancy was an attempt of the papists to foist a supposititious child upon the realm. It seemed clear to them that if the Queen were preg-

⁶ E. Hale, *The Fall of the Stuarts and Western Europe from 1678 to 1697*, a vol. of *Epochs of Modern History*, ed. Edward E. Morris and J. Surtees Phillpotts (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1876), p. 124.

⁷ Macaulay, II, 285

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Walter Scott, ed., *A Collection of Scarce and Valuable Tracts on the Most Interesting and Entertaining Subjects: But Chiefly Such As Relate to the History and Constitution of these Kingdoms* (2nd. ed.; New York: A M S Press, 1965), X, 35. Hereafter cited as *Somers Tracts*.

nant, the Catholics would allow her to have nothing but a healthy son. If a Prince of Wales did not appear, they would create one—and, according to Stephen B. Baxter, “here was one miracle that the most sceptical Protestant knew that the Catholics could bring to pass.”¹⁰

A rumor as improbable as this would hardly have been believed in calmer times; however, so hysterical was the fear of Catholicism in seventeenth-century England that the Protestants almost universally believed James and Mary Beatrice capable of committing any misdoing. A campaign of accusation and slander was well under way by spring of 1688. From the princesses Anne and Mary to porters and laundresses, few alluded to the promised birth without sarcasm. The exultation of the King and the confident predictions of the papists that the child would be a prince were retorted by a myriad of coarse lampoons intended to throw doubts on the alleged condition of the Queen. Wits described the new “miracle” in rhymes not always delicate or genteel, and pamphlets were circulated with titles such as “The Queen’s Great Belly.”¹¹ Belloc wrote in his biography, *James II*, that it was good proof of the impotence into which the monarchy of England had fallen that such tales could not be checked or their authors punished.¹²

On the 29th of December it was reported that the Queen had felt her baby move. In those times it was customary for a pregnant woman to invite her friends to place their hands upon her abdomen and feel the stirrings of the child. Being unusually modest, Mary Beatrice had never allowed any of the ladies of her bed-chamber to practice this custom in past pregnancies and refused to do so this time. Her failure to dress and undress with ceremony and her refusal to discuss her condition with others were traits not shared or understood by Englishwomen of her time; therefore, they interpreted her efforts for privacy to be attempts to hide her real condition. In addition to the wits who mocked and ridiculed the Queen was a group of serious observers dedicated to keeping a detailed record of her every movement. Mary Beatrice’s modesty only furthered the ends of this group

¹⁰Stephen B. Baxter, *William III and the Defense of European Liberty, 1650-1702* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1966), p. 229.

¹¹Rapin de Thoyras, *The History of England*, trans. N. Tindal (5th ed.; London: Knapton, 1962), XII, 82.

¹²Hilaire Belloc, *James the Second* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1928), p. 208.

of her enemies who maintained that "there never was, or appeared to be, any reasonable grounds for a belief that her majesty had conceived a child."¹³

Also numbered among the sceptics was the Princess Anne. Writing to her sister Mary on March 14, 1688, to express her doubts about the Queen's being with child, Anne wrote:

I cannot help thinking . . . the Queen's great belly is a little fufpicious. It is true indeed, fhe is very big, but fhe looks better than ever fhe did, which is not ufual; for people when they are fo far gone, for the moft part, look very ill: befides, 'tis very odd, that the Bath, that all the beft Doctors thought would do her a great deal of harm, fhould have had fo very good effect fo foon, as that fhe fhould prove with child from the firft minute fhe and Manfell (James) met, after her coming from thence. Her being fo pofitive it will be a fon, and the principles of that religion being fuch, that they will ftick at nothing, be it never fo wicked, if it will promote their intereft, give fome caufe to fear there may be foul play intended. I will do all I can to find it out, if it be fo; and if I fhould make any difcovery, you fhall be fure to have an account of it.¹⁴

Anne again wrote her suspicions to her sister on March 20, 1688. She said that she had no doubt that the child would be a son since there was so much "reafon to believe it is a falfe belly. For methinks, if it were not, there having been fo many ftories and jefts made about it, fhe fhould, to convince the world, make either me, or fome of my friends feel her belly."¹⁵

The Queen's pregnancy progressed in a normal manner until Monday in Easter week. On that day the King, who had gone to Rochester to inspect naval preparations, was sent for in haste by the Queen who feared that she was in danger of miscarrying. The Countess of Clarendon came to see Mary Beatrice on that day, not suspecting that she was ill. Being a lady of the bed-chamber to the

¹³*Somers Tracts*, X, 50.

¹⁴Letter of Anne to Mary, March 14, 1688, quoted in *Dalrymple's Memoirs*, III, 300.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 300-301.

Queen Dowager, the Countess entered Mary Beatrice's bed-chamber without asking admittance and saw the Queen lying on the bed moaning, "Undone, undone." The Countess of Powis entered the room, went to Lady Clarendon, and in a sharp manner told her to leave immediately. As she was going out, one of the ladies in the room followed her and charged her not to speak a word of what she had seen to anyone.¹⁶ The matter was quickly silenced; however, on the 9th of May the Queen apprehended miscarrying again.¹⁷ Besides these two instances, little is known of the Queen's condition during the last few months of her pregnancy. James was in so much trouble at home and abroad that the gossips were too busily occupied with him to concern themselves with the Queen.

From the beginning of her pregnancy, Mary Beatrice had been uncertain as to the due-date of the baby, determining it at times from the King's arrival at Bath in the beginning of September and occasionally from their return to Windsor on October 6th—a point of great significance in the controversy. Thinking the baby to be due around the first week in July, the Princess Anne went to Bath in late May. She later insisted that her father forced her to go knowing that the Queen's confinement was near. James claimed that he begged her to remain in London. The testimony of neither can be termed reliable, but the fact that the Princess Anne was not in London at the time of the Queen's delivery was most unfortunate for all concerned. Anne had consistently doubted the Queen's pregnancy and stated that she would not be convinced that the child was Mary Beatrice's unless "I fee the child and fhe parted." ¹⁸

The birth of the Prince of Wales was destined to occur at the inauspicious time when James's popularity was at an all-time low. On June 8th, James had committed to the Tower the Archbishop of Canterbury and six other bishops on charges of seditious libel, thus reducing his already weakened esteem in the eyes of his people and diverting attention from the forthcoming delivery. The Queen was at Whitehall awaiting the completion of repairs to St. James's where

¹⁶ Bishop Burnet, *History of His Own Time* (Oxford: The University Press, 1933), III, 249.

¹⁷Statistical information of the Queen as recorded in *Historical Manuscripts Commission* (Portland MSS), II, 53.

¹⁸Letter of Anne to Mary, March 20, 1688, quoted in *Dalrymple's Memoirs*, III, 301.

she was to go for her confinement. On June 9th, thinking that her time was drawing near, Mary Beatrice sent several messages to the workmen to hurry. When told that it would be impossible to have her bed ready that night, the Queen replied, “ ‘I mean to lie at St. James’s tonight, if I lie on the boards.’ ”¹⁹ Preparations were completed and near eleven o’clock in the evening the Queen was taken to the palace.

At eight o’clock on Sunday morning, June 10th, Mary Beatrice sent for James, told him that her labor had begun, and advised him to summon those whom he wished to witness the birth. Mrs. Judith Wilks, the mid-wife, and Mrs. Margaret Dawson, a woman of the bed-chamber, arrived first and found the Queen alone and crying. She complained of being chilly and asked to have the bed warmed. A warming-pan full of hot coals was then brought into the room and placed in her bed.²⁰ From this circumstance, simple—but unusual in June, came the tale of the spurious child, the “warming-pan baby.” A little after eight o’clock the Countess of Sunderland entered the room just as the Queen was getting into the warmed bed. Thus three witnesses testified that they saw Mary Beatrice enter the bed in which the warming-pan had been placed shortly after eight o’clock. Since the baby was not born until ten o’clock, it would have been exceedingly difficult to have kept even a drugged baby still, quiet, and alive for two hours in a small warming-pan. As proof of the fiction of this story, Mrs. Dawson swore under oath that she saw hot coals in the pan when it was brought into the room.²¹

The King, Queen Dowager, ladies of the Court, royal physicians, attendants, and eighteen members of the Privy Council arrived shortly before nine, filling the tiny room to capacity with 67 witnesses. The curtains at the foot of the bed were drawn but those on the sides remained open. The Queen, being embarrassed, asked James to cover her face with his wig. She had earlier requested that the sex of the child not be announced immediately for fear she would be overcome with emotion. The Countess of Sunderland was then asked to feel

¹⁹Strickland, IX, 163.

²⁰Deposition of Mrs. Margaret Dawson, quoted in *A Complete Collection of State Trials and Proceedings for High Treason and Other Crimes and Misdemeanors from the Earliest Period to the Present Time* (London: T. C. Hansard, 1812), XII, 130. Hereafter cited as Howell’s *State Trials*.

²¹Howell’s *State Trials*, XII, 130.

the Queen's abdomen to dispel Protestants rumors that none had ever felt her "great belly."²²

Labor progressed, and near ten o'clock the child was born. Pre-arranged signs indicating the sex of the child were passed to James, but he, not being satisfied, asked, "What is it?" The mid-wife then replied that it was what he desired. As the infant was being taken into an adjoining room, the King halted the nurse and said to the Privy Council, "You are witnesses that a child is born." Many then entered the next room for closer inspection. The Lord Chancellor Jeffreys stated that when the receiving blanket was opened by the nurse, he saw the male child with all the marks and signs of having just been born.²³

Immediately after birth the infant was seen by three Protestant ladies who later testified on behalf of its legitimacy. Lady Bellasyse even deposed that she saw the child taken from the bed with the navel string still attached.²⁴ Another lady of unswerving Protestant loyalty who saw the baby before he was taken out of the bed-chamber was the Lady Isabella Wentworth. She not only verified the child's birth on oath before the Privy Council, but years after the Revolution told Bishop Burnet that " 'she was as sure the Prince of Wales was the queen's son as that any of her own children were hers.' "²⁵

The birth of the Prince was proclaimed throughout the nation. In his *Diary*, John Evelyn wrote that about two o'clock "we heard the Toure Ordnance discharge, and the Bells ringing; for the Birth of a Prince of Wales."²⁶ The King issued a proclamation establishing days of thanksgiving in England for the birth of his son. Similar days for rejoicing were proclaimed in Scotland, Ireland, and all the colonies. Special prayers were written for the services on those days.²⁷

²²Deposition of Anne, Countess of Sunderland, quoted in Howell's *State Trials*, XII, 127.

²³Deposition of Lord Chancellor Jeffreys, quoted in Howell's *State Trials*, XII, 134.

²⁴Deposition of Lady Susanna Bellasyse, quoted in Howell's *State Trials*, XII, 129.

²⁵Strickland, IX, footnote on p. 166.

²⁶E. S. DeBeer, ed., *The Diary of John Evelyn* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1955), IV, 587. Hereafter cited as *Evelyn's Diary*.

²⁷*Evelyn's Diary*, IV, 588.

On the night of June 10th, the King and the royal physicians were called from their sleep and summoned to attend the child. Apparently the baby had been over-dosed with medicines and was suffering a reaction. One of the nurses, a Mrs. Rugee, in a state of great agitation over the baby's condition, expressed belief that the infant would not live. Her words were overheard, repeated, and by morning it was widely believed that the child had died. Clarendon noted the rumor in his *Diary* and stated that it arose from the alarm over the Prince's health the night before. He went on to say, however, that after receiving "'remedies, God be thanked, he grew better.'"²⁸

James despatched news to William of Orange that the Queen had been safely delivered of a son. William and Mary received the announcement with polite decorum and had prayers said daily in their chapel for the royal infant. William sent Count Zuytlestein to London to extend his best wishes to the new father; however, the five weeks' stay of the Count was more devoted to the gathering of information than to congratulating the King. He talked to the discontented nobility and reported to William that not one in ten believed the child to be the Queen's.²⁹

During this period the Princess Anne returned from Bath and began detailed questioning of Mrs. Dawson, Mrs. Wilks, and other witnesses at the birth. In a letter to her sister Mary on June 18, 1688, Anne wrote that, "My dear fifter can't imagine the concern and vexation I have been in, that I fhould be fo unfortunate to be out of town when the Queen was brought to bed, for I fhall never now be fatisfied, whether the child be true or falfe. It may be it is our brother, but God only knows. . . ." ³⁰ Reflecting the views of most English Protestants, Anne went on to say that "'tis poffible it may be her child; but where one believes it, a thousand do not. For my part . . . I fhall ever be of the number of unbelievers."³¹ Mary, much disturbed by this letter,

²⁸ Clarendon's *Diary*, as quoted in Howell's *State Trials*, XII, 145.

²⁹ Nesca A. Robb, *William of Orange: A Personal Portrait* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1966), II, 261. See also, Leopold von Ranke, *A History of England Principally in the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1875), IV, 398.

³⁰ Letter of Anne to Mary, June 18, 1688, quoted in *Dalrymple's Memoirs*, III, 303.

³¹ *Ibid.*,

returned to Anne a questionnaire covering all events and facts of the birth. The rumors which reached her from England and the answers of Anne to her questions convinced Mary also that the child was not her brother.³²

For the next few weeks the child was intensely scrutinized; even normal changes in his appearance were viewed with scepticism and suspicion. When he became ill at the end of June, some, including the Princess Anne, asserted that this was a trick to make him seem as unhealthy as the Queen's other children. Others maintained that the Prince died and another child had been substituted. The fact that the Queen refused to allow visitors to freely view the child in the nursery supported the rumor of a fraudulent swap.³³

The other children of James and Mary Beatrice had been breast-fed; therefore, it was decided that since they had not survived, this child would be fed by hand. His food was called *watter gruell* and was a mush composed of barley flour, water, sugar, and a few currants. Violent seizures of indigestion and colic, coupled with convulsions, brought the baby dangerously near death. He was taken to Richmond for a change of air, but became so ill there that four physicians were summoned. The doctors examined the child upon their arrival and decided that he was dying.³⁴

While the physicians were at dinner, the King and Queen arrived. Mary Beatrice, completely disgusted with the doctors, sent into the village for a wet-nurse. A Mrs. Cooper, the wife of a tile-maker, was brought to the child, and he responded immediately to milk. In a short time the child was calmed and appeared to be completely healthy. When the physicians returned later in the evening, the infant was so changed in appearance that some thought it impossible for him to be the same baby.³⁵ Thus arose another tale of the child dying and another being substituted.

³²Robb, II, 261. See also, Nellie M. Waterson, *Mary II, Queen of England 1689-1694* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1928), p. 30.

³³Kenyon, "The Birth of the Old Pretender," p. 423.

³⁴Burnet, III, 257.

³⁵*Ibid.*

James, seemingly unaware of the malicious speculations, prepared a lavish display of fireworks over the Thames to celebrate the Prince's birth. Whispers spread through the crowd that the fireworks were really intended to bombard the city in revenge for its joyful demonstrations over the acquittal of the seven Bishops. So intense was the conviction that the royal birth was a fraud that Poet Laureate John Dryden included a section in his "Britannia Rediviva" repelling the reports of a spurious child:

Born in broad daylight, that the' ungrateful rout
May find no room for a remaining doubt;
Truth, which itself is light, does darkness shun,
And the true eaglet safely dares the sun.³⁶

While James was acclaiming the birth of his son as a mark of Divine favor, his enemies were viciously circulating the rumors of the "warming-pan baby" or the "supposititious prince." In times of high passion, men generally believe what they wish; therefore, these tales of a sinister hoax were greedily received by most dissenting minds even though based upon gross inconsistencies. The predominant theory among the variety of contradictory rumors was that the Queen had never been pregnant, but had, with the cooperation of the King and papists, gone through the procedures of a pregnancy. When time of delivery came, a child was smuggled into her bed in a warming-pan and presented as the Prince of Wales. Another rumor was that the Queen, though originally with child, had miscarried at Easter and had feigned a continued pregnancy which culminated in the "warming-pan baby" episode. Still others maintained that the Queen had been delivered of a child on June 10th who died immediately and was substituted for in the adjoining room. Another group asserted that the child born of the Queen died during the night of June 10th and was substituted for by another child who later died at the age of six weeks at Richmond. They then insisted that the substituted child was replaced by still another infant.³⁷

The contradictions in these accounts were questioned by few. Sometimes combinations of several accounts were made to produce widely accepted, though totally illogical, versions of the "suppositi-

³⁶ George R. Noyes, ed., *The Poetical Works of Dryden* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Riverside Press, 1950), p. 255.

³⁷ Burnet, III, 257; See also, Rapin, XII, 93-94.

THE CASE OF THE SUPPOSITITIOUS PRINCE

tious prince" story. In his *History of My Own Time*, Bishop Burnet first declared that the Queen had never been pregnant, and then a few pages later he maintained that she had miscarried at Easter. In his accounts of the child substitutions, he judged that three swaps were made—³⁸a most difficult task to perform while a hostile and suspicious nation looked on! In spite of its inconsistencies, the legend of the "supposititious prince" became enshrined in the hearts of a generation of Englishmen. As Kenyon wrote in *The Stuarts*, "because the warming-pan legend has been so thoroughly discredited by posterity, its influence on the credulous majority in 1688 should not be underestimated. To many it was an excuse, to some a complete justification, for all that followed."³⁹

On June 30, 1688, an invitation was dispatched to William of Orange appealing for his help. The signators of the letter expressed their regret that William had recognized the legitimacy of the child and informed him that not one in a thousand believed the infant to be the Queen's. They reminded William that one of the main principles upon which he could base his invasion of England was to protect the right of his wife to the throne from a supposititious heir. Prayers for the young child were discontinued in William's chapels on July 7th. Mary had been convinced from the announcement of the pregnancy that James's alleged son was not to be a legitimate Prince of Wales. Most historians agree that as pious and conventional as Mary was, she would never have supported William's "impious and unconventional policy" if she had had any doubts on this issue.⁴⁰

In mid-October William published a declaration in which he set forth his reasons for the invasion. He directly accused James and Mary Beatrice of attempting to foist a supposititious prince upon the kingdom, writing that "not only he himself, but all the good Subjects of the Kingdom, did vehemently suspect, that the Pretended Prince of Wales was not born of the Queen."⁴¹ James was furious over this

³⁸Burnet, III, 253-257.

³⁹J. P. Kenyon, *The Stuarts: A Study in English Kingship* (London: B. T. Batsford, Ltd., 1958), p. 175.

⁴⁰Sir Charles Firth, *A Commentary on Macaulay's History of England* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1938), p. 314. See also the following: Waterson, p. 30; Baxter, p. 226; and, Kenyon, *The Stuarts*, p. 174.

⁴¹*The History and Proceedings of the House of Lords from the Restoration in 1660 to the Present Time* (London: Ebenezer Timberland, 1742), I, 322.

accusation concerning his son. He answered William's charge by a counter-attack in which he stated that the Prince of Orange was so eager to gain the throne of England that " 'he called in Queftion the Legitimacy of the Prince of Wales, his Majefty's Son and Heir apparent; tho' by the Providence of God, there were prefent at his Birth fo many Witneffes of unquesftionable Credit, as if it feemed the peculiar Care of Heaven, on purpofe to difappoint fo wicked and unparrallell'd an Attempt.' "42 In the midst of this controversy, the child was baptized as Jacobus Franciscus Edwardus in the Roman Catholic chapel of St. James's. The Pope and Louis XIV were God-fathers and the Queen Dowager, Godmother.⁴³

A pamphlet allegedly written by Bishop Burnet and entitled *A Memorial from the English Protestants for their Highnesses the Prince and Princess of Orange* was distributed in England at this time. After listing national grievances, the author stated that it was evident that the King and Queen had foisted a spurious child upon the nation because "his majesty would never suffer the witnesses who were present at the queen's delivery to be examined."⁴⁴ James could not ignore this challenge. Therefore, he called an extraordinary meeting of the Privy Council on the 22nd of October for the purpose of hearing the testimony of witnesses present at the birth.⁴⁵

In the council chamber at Whitehall assembled the King, the Queen Dowager, Prince George of Denmark, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lord-Mayor and Aldermen of London, all the lords spiritual and temporal who were in the city, members of the Privy Council, and witnesses. James addressed the crowd by condemning the malicious endeavors of his enemies which had so poisoned the minds of some of his subjects that "very many do not think this son with which God hath blessed me, to be mine, but a supposed child."⁴⁶ James continued to say that he expected the arrival of the Prince of Orange at any time, and was, therefore, determined to have the matter of the child's birth cleared before the country became engaged in conflict.

⁴² *Ibid.*, I, 328

⁴³ Letter of Nathaniel Molyneux to Roger Kenyon, undated, *Historical Manuscripts Commission* (Kenyon MSS), p. 204.

⁴⁴ *Somers Tracts*, X, 40.

⁴⁵ Howell's *State Trials*, XII, 123-125.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 125.

THE CASE OF THE SUPPOSITITIOUS PRINCE

Depositions of all witnesses were taken. Forty ladies and gentlemen of high rank plus the mid-wife, nurses, and four physicians testified that they were present at the child's birth and believed him to have been born of the Queen at ten o'clock on the morning of June 10, 1688. Of the witnesses, twenty-three were Protestants and seventeen Roman Catholics. The depositions of all except the Queen Dowager were taken upon oath, confirmed by them the following day, and enrolled in Chancery. The evidence given at this hearing was so positive, minute, and detailed that all who were present appeared to be satisfied.⁴⁷

The testimony was published on November first and was considered by judicious and impartial readers to be conclusive. But, as Macaulay wrote, "the judicious are always a minority; and scarcely anybody then was impartial."⁴⁸ The great majority of the people were still unconvinced of the child's legitimacy and viewed the testimony with a sceptical cynicism. The Protestant nation firmly believed that the papist witnesses had perjured themselves in the interest of their Church; thus, their testimony was totally disregarded. What evidence remained was carefully scrutinized while accusations of greed or fraud were levelled against those who gave it. The depositions taken at this hearing failed to remove the prevailing doubts and suspicions of the masses because so many questions remained unanswered. For example, why was there no prelate of the Anglican Church present? Why was the Dutch Ambassador not summoned to represent the interests of William and Mary? Why were not the Hyde brothers, uncles of Anne and Mary and loyal servants of the Anglican Church and the crown, not present? Why, in summary, was there no witness present whose testimony could command public respect and confidence?⁴⁹

James's failure to carefully authenticate the birth of his son was considered inexcusable. Though posterity has, according to Macaulay, fully acquitted the King of the fraud with which his people imputed him, one certainly cannot acquit him of "folly and perverseness." James was aware of the suspicions which were abroad and ex-

⁴⁷Macaulay, II, 424: See also, Strickland, IX, 187.

⁴⁸Macaulay, II, 424.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

hibited gross negligence in not insuring the presence at the birth of witnesses whose testimony would command respect and belief. Even though James was surprised that the delivery date of the Queen occurred earlier than expected, he still managed to find time to crowd the room with Roman Catholics and court followers whose word was unsatisfactory to Protestant England. Just as easily, the King could have procured the presence of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Hyde brothers, and other eminent persons whose loyalty to the Church of England and the two princesses would have been unquestioned.⁵⁰

On November 15, 1688, William began his march from Torbay to London. Deserted by friends and family, James fled to France where he, Mary Beatrice, and their son were given the palace of St. Germaine and an annual pension of 40,000 pounds by Louis XIV. Prayers for the Prince of Wales were discontinued on December 30th in all Anglican churches.⁵¹ In his declaration, William had promised to investigate the legitimacy of the child's birth, but by the time the Convention assembled in 1689, the matter was dropped. Though the government itself made no effort to pursue the subject of a supposititious prince, it made no attempt to curb the flood of rumors, broadsides, and pamphlets asserting that James Francis Edward was a bricklayer's son or a miller's child. From these stories came the custom of featuring a windmill as the family's coat-of-arms on derogatory pamphlets and the nick-name, "James O' the Mill."⁵²

In the spring of 1692, James, in exile, wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury and to his former Privy Council inviting them to come to St. Germaine and witness the birth of a child expected in May.⁵³ No suspicion, scepticism, or even attention was accorded this pregnancy. The birth of Maria Theresa had few Protestant witnesses; yet this child was always acknowledged as being the legitimate daughter of Mary Beatrice and James II. James Francis Edward, the 'Old Pretender,' died in Rome, January 1, 1766. The rumors surrounding his birth were abandoned by the Whigs in 1710. From that

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, II, 330.

⁵¹*Evelyn's Dairy*, IV, 496.

⁵²Kenyon, "The Birth of the Old Pretender," p. 425.

⁵³Letter of James II to the Archbishop of Canterbury, March 23, 1692, *Historical Manuscripts Commission* (Finch MSS), IV, 40.

time on they preferred to assert that James II had been deposed for breaking the "Original Contract" instead of for foisting a supposititious prince.⁵⁴

Though most scholars today treat the legend of the supposititious prince as an absurd fabrication, the accusations levelled against James and his Queen are impossible to completely prove or disprove. An evaluation of the evidence indicates that in all probability James Francis Edward was their son and rightful heir to the English throne. In ordinary circumstances the question of the legitimacy of the child's birth would never have arisen. Circumstances, however, in 1688 were not ordinary. Though Catholics were regarded with total and abject suspicion, had James been a more perceptive man, wiser in the ways of his subjects, history might have omitted the legend of the supposititious prince and the chapter of the Glorious Revolution.

⁵⁴Bryan Bevan, "The Old Pretender—1688-1766," *Contemporary Review*, CCVIII (January 1966), 36.